

THE COUNTRY VS
THE H B COMPANY

CAPTAIN M. H. SYLVE

1861



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COUNTRY v. THE COMPANY,

OR

WHY BRITISH NORTH AMERICA MAY BE
PEOPLED, AND HOW IT MAY BE DONE.

WITH

SUGGESTIONS TOWARDS A PLAN FOR DOING SO TO
THE BEST ADVANTAGE.

BY

CAPTAIN M. H. SYNGE, R.E., F.R.G.S.

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THE COUNTRY v. THE COMPANY.

As to why British North America may be peopled, it will be sufficient to observe that the recent explorations which have been respectively conducted under the auspices of the Canadian and Imperial Governments—those, namely, of Hind and of Paliser—have abundantly corroborated all previous testimony, and have established beyond doubt, if doubt ever existed, that the vast tract of country forming the interior of British North America is perfectly fitted for inhabitation, more so, in not a few respects, than many parts of the prosperous and noble country known as Canada.

That vast interior, extending from Canada to British Columbia, forms, in the next place, the only link wanting to complete the chain of British colonies from shore to shore of the American continent. It affords besides incomparably the best communication for the new colonies of British Columbia and Vancouver Island with Great Britain. These colonies are now only accessible either through a most circuitous and expensive transit across the Isthmus of Panama, or by the yet more circuitous and tedious passage round Cape Horn.

The communication across British North America

would not, however, be of use to these new colonies only, but it is also, in many respects, the best* that can anywhere be constructed, or established, for the whole Northern Pacific seaboard, whether Asiatic or American.

The abbreviation which can be obtained in the time of transit, moreover, and which is the necessary result of three thousand miles of the distance between Europe and the Pacific, being by land instead of on the sea, as well as the consequent still greater rapidity of telegraphic intercourse, render the communication the most prompt that can be formed, even with respect to New Zealand and Australia.

Lastly, the interior of British North America is already the seat of a certain population, a colony that fain would be, and that has long struggled to be, but the inhabitants of which have not yet been enabled to emancipate themselves from a yoke, and to overcome an obstruction that has been to the present time the insuperable barrier in the way of their prosperity. They have long earnestly sought to become, and they require to be, a population of *freemen* (that is the very term in local use), and

* This subject has been fully dealt with in the works and writings of Major R. Carmichael-Smyth, Mr. Asa Whitney, and others. In the 22nd volume of the "Journal of the Royal Geographical Society," and in a pamphlet entitled "Great Britain One Empire," the above statement will be found conclusively established.

thus to surmount a spurious and artificial impediment, the solitary and most striking remnant of a system and an abuse, at utter and irreconcilable variance with every principle and practice of the present day.

How this may be accomplished, that is, how British North America may be peopled, and how it may be done to the best advantage, may be discussed together; for if it be desirable that it should be done, it is unquestionably as desirable that it should be done to the *best advantage*.

Now, there is but one way to carry out any enterprise with success, which is, to plan it with premeditation and to execute it according to opportunity; and there is but one means of carrying out any enterprise to the best advantage, and this is, so to plan it that it shall fully unite every attainable end, and so to execute it that the combined resources interested in the enterprise shall be brought to bear with the utmost effect upon impediments reduced to the smallest possible dimensions.

Judged by this simple but undeniable rule, the peopling of the interior is not of necessity a work of difficulty; but, on the contrary, the difficulty, if there be any, is of extraneous and artificial imposition.

A tract of country, lying in the direction of the very best and largest, or, at the least, of one of the very best and largest commercial highways of the world, is not likely to remain uninhabited, except for some insuperable reason.

What, then, are the reasons commonly assigned? If we go back to the year 1847 or 1848, when such proposals were first made in definite form, we shall find, in the first place, that the geographical relation resulting from the position of America between Europe and the Pacific and Asia was then too little generally understood to be either received or contradicted. Still less appreciated was the self-evident abbreviation of a track in proportion to its position northward, although it is the necessary consequence of the earth's form.

A just apprehension of the subject became, under such circumstances, hopeless. Not only, moreover, was the physical geography of the country to be traversed as little known, but the necessary results of its formation were as little understood.

Lastly, when the irrefutable proofs of the general bearings of the question were adduced from the very conformation of the globe, the sterility of the soil, and the unconquerable rigours of the climate, and the impossibility of crossing the Rocky Mountains, were triumphantly upheld; and the mass of evidence to the contrary was attempted to be finally got rid of by unscrupulous and unhesitating assertions, that the similar line proposed in the United States admitted of easier construction, where the climate was more favourable, the Government and people far more energetic, and that the British question might therefore be dropped without farther inquiry, as two lines were then and for ever impossible.

Two lines of quickest transit across the continent of America, in the healthiest and most advantageous latitude, impossible!

These assertions have all been severally refuted by facts, the most unanswerable of all evidence. The line in the United States has not been constructed; its very propounder* has testified to the superior merits of that proposed in British territory, and has declared that in the United States to have become, through the force of circumstances, impossible of execution upon the plan he had suggested. The construction of railroads throughout the length and breadth of Canada has been the practical reply to their alleged impossibility and uselessness. The explorations with their accompanying scientific observations have equally refuted the asserted impracticability of the country for inhabitation or settlement; and the often traversed mountains have once more been proved to be passable not impenetrable.

Strongest and most influential of all, however, was, in all probability, the general impression and reasoning derived from the fact that such advantages and opportunities, as were, by the favourers of this enterprize, alleged to exist, had not been developed by those in virtual sovereignty and in actual possession of the country, and who moreover, far from bestowing upon them their co-operation, approval or favour, met the propositions advanced

* See Letter of Mr. Asa Whitney to Morning Chronicle, 1858, upon this subject.

with their most determined disfavour and their most strenuous opposition.

The opponents of the measures certainly held the nine points, the strong points of the law. They held possession of these premises, and of the country. This general impression is probably the chief remaining, or at least the foremost remaining obstacle to the development of British North America; but the specious reasoning on which it rests would prove too much.

Excepting indeed the gratification of curiosity, and the abstract promotion of science, every object for the attainment of which the North West was ever sought can be accomplished over the territory though not over the Arctic ocean of America; but whilst expedition after expedition has been allowed to sail at a vast expenditure of men and money to a region from which but one account ever could be returned, the suggestions of Sir Alexander Mackenzie* have been steadily treated with neglect. The tracts of country severally lying west of the mid-channel of the Mississippi, west of the Rocky mountains and south of the parallel of 49° north latitude, were all successively surrendered or got rid of, and the valuable character of each, conceded only after its abstraction from British territory, then, however, to be scrupulously allowed and most sedulously proclaimed to the disparagement by comparison and contrast of what remained British possession.

* The first discoverer overland of the Pacific and Arctic sea boards of North America.

As is well known all that territory that has been described, as well as that of the Californias,* not only might, have been, but actually would have formed part of the British empire had the state of general information been such as to lead public opinion to require it. British neglect of American resources proves then either too little or too much. The countries that have been most exalted in opposition to what remains to England in America have once been equally or even more neglected.

It will be said Colonisation never should be, and never can be, forced, and that a well favoured country will, at the proper time, attract to it its own population and then form the best and the most prosperous, indeed the only practicable colonisation. No proposition can be more correct; but there are others not less true. One is, the aphorism does not apply in a case where colonisation labours under artificial obstruction; and to contend for the abolition of such impediment is not to force colonisation nor yet attempting to do so. It is to require for it a fair field and a free opportunity.

Of all restrictions, surely the most barbarous, the most reprehensible, yea, even the most criminal and cruel, in an age redundant with population and in a country where man meets man in an industrial struggle for the very means of existence, is that which for the private benefit of an unscrupulous faction whose bad faith is stamped upon the records

* See Captain Sir E. Belcher, C.B., R.N. upon this subject.

of its whole existence, impedes the colonisation of a continent and prevents the development of the world's best and quickest way of intercourse. This impediment must be made to cease.

This brings us to the question of time and means. Now perhaps nothing is more likely than that the rebound may be strong, hasty, and precipitous in proportion to the length and tediousness of the previous procrastination. Few things are more common than instances of such reaction; but no enterprise so entered upon can be conducted to the best advantage.

A European war is not the most favourable hour for great commercial undertakings or for projects of colonisation.

When the planning and execution of a work passes from the hands of those who have conceived it and most patiently and assiduously studied it in all its bearings, it is little likely to profit by the change. Yet no event can, for the very want of it, if it be not constructed—or if it be, by the inestimable benefits it would secure—shew more effectively the stupendous value of such a line of connection between all parts of the British Empire, and indeed with half the globe, than would a European war. How possibly imminent such an event may be, it were quite superfluous to say here.

Again, no circumstances can be more favourable to the organisation of the BEST PLAN for opening

such a country and communication as are here proposed than when the elements of the matter are ready to hand, but before they are in motion. Of all the features which enter into the consideration of this subject, and which so wonderfully unite to form its comprehensive and extraordinarily practical whole, the most remarkable is that presented by the physical geography, that is to say, the conformation, of the country. This is such as to elevate the mind at once to its superhuman origin, as formed and impressed a part of primitive creation. Where the world's girdle presents the shortest communication between the most populous countries of Europe and Asia the track is marked, and, in every principal part, already formed across the continent of America.

By the lakes and rivers, and by the railways of Canada or of the United States, the head of Lake Superior is accessible even by a choice and variety of ways.

Around Red River is the languishing settlement already referred to; and a few small steamers will suffice, in the first instance, to open out the vast plains of the N. and S. Saskatchewan, of the Qu'Appelle River, and of the shores of Lake Winnipeg.

Will any one pretend to doubt the speedy and prosperous settlement of a country possessed of such natural advantages, were it but once thrown open to the influences of civilization by the abolition of most flagrantly unjust and exclusive powers—not rights—both of government and trade?

On the west lies the Colony of British Columbia, also languishing indeed, in a measure, in its remote and unnatural isolation, and by the still subsisting influence of those who see in the prosperity of any escaped possession the shadow of their approaching fall; but the passage of the Rocky Mountains is no longer even pleaded as a barrier between the vast plains of the interior and the western shores of the Pacific.

Union (the union of intercourse and communication is intended) with British Columbia, and so with the Pacific, will complete itself with the inflow of population, according to the true merits of the route and of the country, when the impenetrable barrier of the lingering monopoly no longer stops the way. Nature herself will carry the tide of population to the foot of the mountains without effort of their own: then industry, refreshed and invigorated, finding here the first call for its constructive exercise, will soon perfect the natural passage of the mountains.

Nor can it be reasonably questioned that it will equally push its way eastward, and connect itself with Canada, to perfect and complete in that direction the connection of the opposite oceans, the great imperial highway of Great Britain and her colonies.

Here again lakes and rivers offer the facilities which necessarily attend them; and the chain of Rainy Lake and River, Lake of the Woods, Rat River and the Red River, leaves but comparatively little that must first be indispensably done by man.

There can be no reason for delaying to begin this work, and to secure these benefits.

If colonization should not be and cannot be forced, at least it must have an opportunity; and it is entitled to a free and open one. The continuance of its obstruction is a general, and, to the present inhabitants of the country, a special wrong and injury. The abolition of that obstruction is the indispensable first step; and the time for it is come. The time has come to end the evils its virtual prohibition has entailed, and in their stead to initiate the development of the country by granting it the privileges of open access and free trade, by putting up its lands for sale, and by bestowing upon it the just benefits of the ordinary government of a new colony of Great Britain.

How strange it seems in this day that these things should have to be pleaded for as privileges and as boons; nay, that they will have to be earnestly contended for to be obtained!

Next, as to the Plan for opening the country to the best advantage.

Its prosperity will, doubtless, be in direct proportion to the completeness and excellency with which the grand connection between the oceans on its opposite shores shall be ultimately completed. Great as its intrinsic value must, for obvious reasons, be, both from the vast extent of territory and the great trade it must necessarily occasion, its chief interest and importance may yet probably

be justly ascribed to the opportunity which it affords for the unequalled highway adverted to.

The principles on which such a work should be constructed may be briefly summed up as consisting of—

1st, Unity of Pre-design, and

2nd, Gradual self-developing execution.

No doubt Government is in a condition to combine and to apply the two. There is as little reason however for questioning the presumptive certainty that it will not depart from its more recently adopted principles, and not undertake a work which, in its hands, would be not unlikely to assume the form of complete simultaneous execution, which then might indeed force colonization and lead to many evils, if not to a long period of failure.

This mode of execution may therefore be dismissed from view; but how is a commercial company to enter upon a work which involves the erection of new colonies and their government, without becoming a fresh monopoly or a company similar to that superseded so recently in India?

There is a very simple means of securing all the benefits without incurring the evils or dangers of either alternative; and this is by a combination, or rather by a co-operation of the two sources. Such co-operation is, moreover, essential and indispensable to the best execution as well as to the present initiation of the works.

If, on the one hand, Government be stepping out

of its legitimate and beneficial sphere, if it enter upon commercial speculation and undertakings, so, on the other, a commercial company, perfectly uncontrolled, neither can nor will of itself necessarily choose the best line of direction for the general interests of the empire, for the undertaking itself, nor even as respects only its component parts; neither can it, as has been said, enter upon any of the functions of government without overstepping its proper limits, and re-creating the anomaly and evil already pointed out.

The necessity for such unity of pre-design as is here contended for, the security for which a company cannot in itself convey, may be shown from a very few short but striking examples, such as the inequality in the size of locks of the several canals in Canada, and even of the several locks of the same canal. This is an apt and melancholy illustration. The misdirection of lines of railway for the secret and corrupt benefit of private parties is another that must be familiar to nearly all. The purchase of most valuable steamers on one of the Canadian lakes, which were intended to ply on another wholly inaccessible to them, on account of the dimensions of the connecting canal, is an instance of the blunders that may be committed by uncontrolled commercial companies.

Such errors would be fatal to the best success of such an undertaking as the present; they might altogether endanger its success.

In order to escape such errors and to obtain the advantages to be secured by the united exertions of the government and of commercial companies, it is accordingly proposed, That the enterprize should be planned and carried into execution as a whole, although consisting of distinct component parts and entrusted, either each or altogether, to one or more commercial companies.

Thus the railroads wherever executed would have one gauge, and be without any break or interruption, whether through diversity of construction or through the private hostility of uncontrolled companies.

The improvements of the navigation would be carried out with reference to all the waters forming part of the same connection. The accumulating volume and increasing depth of water of descending streams would be kept in view ; and natural advantages would not be liable to be frustrated by injudicious local construction, but would, on the contrary, be improved to the fullest possible extent.

Telegraphic communication would be so constructed as to keep in view the complete ultimate connection as well as the requirements of each locality.

The physical geography of the country is such as to favour the separate and gradual execution of the several parts of the track in the highest possible degree, and to render it thereby a safe commercial

enterprise, easy of execution, and capable even of self-regulating adjustment.

Where then is there any difficulty remaining? There is not any in fact, if the will only be not wanting; for what, lastly, are the aspects under which this proposal presents itself to the Government and to the capitalist whose co-operation is sought?

The first point is the deliverance of the land from the yoke, dominion, and exclusive privileges of trade of the existing Hudson's Bay Company.

The power to effect this at any moment has been expressly reserved by the Crown, and it would be at once accomplished by the proclamation of any part or parts thereof to be made a colony or colonies. Where the inhabitants have expressed so anxious and persistent a desire for this boon as has been the case by those of the Red River settlement, the Government can have but one objection to acceding to the request, the expense, namely, of providing the necessary local government.

If this objection cannot be met by a mortgage on the territory of the new colony, or by the retention of special tracts for the repayment of the Imperial treasury, the now incontrovertibly authenticated accounts of the resources of the country must, by some inexplicable mystery, be after all a fable, and the whole enterprise falls to the ground. This, however, is not the case, and with whomsoever and howsoever negotiated a mortgage for the amount on

the territory or proximate funds of the new colony would furnish an ample* security. Nor is it necessary that the Imperial treasury should furnish the expense. The Imperial guarantee would be sufficient to enable the young colony to obtain the necessary sum, and at once to charge itself with the burden of its own expenses. Its debt would be proportioned to and yet be liquidated by the rate of its development.

Does it admit of question that the opening of the colony would be immediately followed by steamers plying upon its noble and varied natural navigation? Yet, as has been said, this once effected, the Rocky Mountains are accessible to their very base. Will not this lead to inhabitation? Will not that inhabitation lead again to the farther improvement of such natural navigation, and yet more speedily perhaps to the railroad traversing its magnificent plains? Are not all these undertakings, however, compactly predesigned to form a perfect whole, capable of execution by any number of separate and limited companies? Cannot land companies, or companies for fishing or mining purposes, be formed on the same model in as great numbers as may find occasion?

* The withdrawal of the Imperial troops from Canada was advocated as a measure of economy; yet the "Ordnance Lands," simultaneously surrendered, yield a revenue sufficient to maintain a larger military force than had ever been sent to the country! This statement rests on the authority of a distinguished member of the Canadian legislature.

Or what, again, is to hinder one chief company, or a confederation of companies, or of branches of one company, from conducting the speculation as a whole, in parts severally perfectly distinct in liability and profit?

The best development of British North America, let it be borne in mind, would be by such a company, confederation, or union, however it might be defined. To such a company the instant acquisition of the whole trade and country is possible, and the prosecution of the fur trade in its legitimate sphere would be but one of its varied branches. It might, therefore, at once enter upon the liberation and settlement of interior British North America (and the successive construction of the route according to the inflow of population and the growth of prosperity, as already described), and do so with success, subject to the whole charges of the existing Hudson's Bay Company, if fairly valued. *It could not lose*, unless it conducted its affairs with less ability than the existing Company. The only limits which can be traced to its possible prosperity are those which bound the civilization of the continent and the development of the triple communication from shore to shore.

Does not, however, the suspicion again involuntarily obtrude itself, that if this were all strictly true and absolutely correct, the conduct of the Hudson's Bay Company, in neglecting such opportunities and in opposing such proposals, is perfectly inexplicable.

The reply might be an appeal to the acts and history of the Company, to exploring expeditions suffered to go forth as expeditions of discovery to regions they had mapped; but it may perhaps admit besides of other possible or probable solution.

What if a limited number of persons receive, without exertion, trouble, or anxiety, a return on all the capital they so desire to invest, much greater in proportion to the extent of that capital; in other words, a far higher rate of interest on the amount of capital invested than can be expected, or than is pretended can be the case on the whole amount of capital required to open the country to civilisation and to carry out the route? What if the fear be entertained, besides, that the exceedingly good dividends on the limited capital of a fur company might lessen before the advance of a much greater capital applied to purposes of civilisation, accompanied, indeed, by far more widely diffused prosperity, but by a less return on every separate pound invested? What if it be feared that the very organisation of the Company might be endangered? The extreme dependence of all the servants of the Company be exchanged for the comparative liberty of a proximity to civilised life? What if their tastes were similarly affected, and the temptations to a change of life daily exhibited almost before their very eyes proved irresistible? What if they all struggled to be *free-men*? It is not said these things are so, or, if so,

justly so. They are simply* surmise. Add thereto, however, a consciousness of conduct little fitted to bear the light of public scrutiny, and little honourable in its share as national history; add a dying charter, and a title questionable at the best. Are these not enough, if not to justify, yet to explain by natural causes, the opposition of the Company?

It is not, indeed, the reasoning of honour or of patriotism; it is the reasoning of selfishness; and, let it not be forgotten, it is as much the reasoning of error; but it is not impossible.

If the reasons admit only of surmise, the conduct of the Company and its impenetrable obstructiveness are matters beyond doubt, and must be ended.

How then are the successive steps to be now taken to be summed up?

First, the country from the borders of Canada to those of British Columbia must be freed. There must be no exclusive usurpations from the parallel of the South boundary to the northernmost limit of British American waters.

This can be done either,

By the Imperial Government by proclamation, as has been shown;

By purchase from, or by co-operation with, the Hudson's Bay Company;

* The position of the Company with respect to the enterprise is treated in a Letter to the Governor of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1853, now published for the first time. The attention of the reader is requested thereto, as well as to the publications to which reference has been already made.

By contest against the Hudson's Bay Company.

Secondly, a Company must be formed so framed as to embrace as a whole the scheme that has been sketched, but so arranged that the parts can be separately and successively taken up for execution, either by the Company or other companies; but in either case so as not to break the unity of design and plan.

The system should be approved and adherence to it provided for by Government.

Where is there any difficulty?

What is to deter the capitalist?

There is no difficulty, there is nothing to deter; and it may be confidently stated, when once this undertaking is entered upon, and *so conducted*, it will speedily and triumphantly extend from end to end; and it will accomplish, so long as that plan is adhered to, all that has been said.

THE END.

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